

VZCZCXRO9717
PP RUEHAG RUEHROV RUEHSL RUEHSR
DE RUEHCY #1115/01 2361445
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 241445Z AUG 09
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3606
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHWH/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CARACAS 001115

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/23/2024
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [ECON](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: RAMPANT CRIME IN VENEZUELA - CHAVEZ'S ACHILLES
HEEL?

CARACAS 00001115 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: DCM JOHN CAULFIELD FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY. With a murder rate of 130 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, Caracas is generally considered the most dangerous city in Latin America, if not the world. Over 90 percent of homicides in Venezuela go unpunished, and recent polling suggests more Venezuelans may be starting to lay the blame directly at the feet of the central government. Many analysts fault Chavez's 1999 reform of the penal code for the surge in violent crime, and opposition mayors are trying to increase the sense of security for their populations that they hope will in turn translate into future success at the ballot box. The Venezuelan government appears to have recognized its vulnerability on the crime issue and is struggling to enact policies to gain control of the situation before public concern over crime damages Chavez's standing with his base. END SUMMARY

THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

2. (SBU) Just over a decade ago and before President Hugo Chavez came to power, Venezuela had a homicide rate similar to that of Brazil and Mexico, of between 18 and 20 victims per 100,000 inhabitants. By 2008, those countries had maintained roughly the same homicide rate while Venezuela's had skyrocketed to 50 murders per 100,000 citizens, leading to 14,000 homicide deaths throughout the country last year. The most reliable figures available suggest there has been a 30 percent increase in the murder rate thus far in 2009. Venezuela's capital of Caracas, with a current rate of around 130 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, is generally considered the most dangerous city in Latin America, if not the world. Venezuela has known high crime for decades, but in recent years the level of insecurity has risen dramatically. Embassy Political officers met with a range of sociologists, criminologists and opposition politicians to better understand the epidemic of violence that has gripped the country and to analyze whether this social scourge could become a political liability for President Chavez.

3. (C) Dr. Roberto Briceno-Leon, Director of the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence, in August provided poloffs with a comprehensive study of insecurity in Venezuela that charts the increase in crime over the past ten years. Briceno-Leon said that the staggering crime figures released by the Venezuelan government do not do justice to the actual number of murders committed in the country, because the government's figures do not include "deaths of unknown cause" nor "deaths from resisting authority." He says that the government each year lumps several thousands of deaths into these categories to lower the official homicide rate. These comments were echoed by Marcos Tarre, Venezuelan security expert and advisor for Greater Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma, who added that he believes corrupt Venezuelan police officers may be involved in some 20 percent of the "deaths from resisting authority" that the government tries to keep out of the official tally.

4. (C) The roots of the most recent crime explosion in Venezuela can be found in Chavez's penal code reform of 1999, according to Pedro Rangel Rojas, director of the leading Venezuelan anti-crime think tank INCOSEC. Rangel, a former General in the Venezuelan Army who used to lead its anti-guerilla force and who later served as chief of police in the Caracas municipality of Chacao, told poloffs in July that the reform led to 12,000 criminals being released from jail and put back on the streets without supervision. He said this was part of Chavez's efforts to show his concern for the poor and downtrodden of Venezuelan society. The mass release, however, quickly overwhelmed the capacity of police to maintain order. The penal reform also included provisions for the prosecution of any police officer found to have made an arrest "without cause." Rangel said the practical effect of the penal code reform was to make police officers more hesitant to make arrests.

5. (C) Further complicating local policing, after surviving the short-lived coup in April 2002, Chavez disarmed state and

local police forces to prevent future uprisings. This left police across the country vastly out-gunned by narcotraffickers and other criminal groups. Rangel said that Chavez's public statements also serve to decriminalize delinquency, such as when he said that if he were as poor as many in Venezuela's vast slums, he too would commit crimes to

CARACAS 00001115 002.2 OF 004

help feed his family. Our contacts tell us that over 90 percent of homicides committed in Venezuela go unpunished, and only a fraction result in a trial and conviction. Criminologists assess that this de facto impunity encourages even more aggressive behavior from, mostly, young males living in Venezuela's poor barrios.

OPPOSITION TRYING TO MAKE CRIME AN ELECTORAL ISSUE

16. (C) While crime in Venezuela as a whole is not a new phenomenon and the vast majority of crimes still occur in poor Venezuelan barrios, there has been a marked increase in crimes committed in middle class and wealthier neighborhoods. In a country where barrios regularly abutt neighborhoods of mansions and golf courses and where gasoline costs just pennies per gallon, crime has become highly mobile in recent years. Marcos Tarre and Roberto Briceno-Leon told poloffs there are some 5-10 so-called "express kidnappings" (secuestro express) committed in Venezuela each day, although only 2-3 are actually reported. During these express kidnappings, wealthier individuals are held for a period of hours while their ATM accounts are systematically emptied or while a small ransom that a family or business can quickly and quietly pay is collected. Several of our contacts say that the fear of these express kidnappings and other serious crimes keep many Venezuelans locked up like prisoners in their own homes, and that this situation has become a political issue for opposition voters in recent years. Chavez has admitted on occasion that he does not care about what happens in wealthier neighborhoods as his responsibility is to the country's poor. Venezuelan sociologists tell us that Chavez has, as he has done with much of the rest of his agenda, politicized crime and made it into an issue of rich versus poor.

17. (C) The Venezuelan political opposition is trying to seize on this issue and exploit what they see as a potential Chavez weakness. Dr. Briceno-Leon told poloffs in August that the challenge for the opposition is to "politicize the issue without making it partisan." He said that the opposition needs to show that they are concerned with how Venezuela's rampant crime is affecting the entire population, including Chavez supporters in the barrios, and not just the middle and upper class voters who make up their own traditional base. One of the current strategies under discussion by the opposition's unity steering group is to venture into poorer areas and try to convince Chavez supporters that the opposition has better anti-crime policies to respond to exploding crime than the government.

18. (C) Opposition mayors in Caracas in particular appear to have taken this message on board and told poloffs in July and August that they are focusing their efforts on reducing crime in their municipalities as a way to demonstrate good governance and improve the lives of their electorate. The mayors of Baruta, Chacao, Hatillo, and Sucre have all had success in recent months in reducing violent crime, and the Mayor of Chacao told poloffs in July that he is exporting his model of fighting crime to other Venezuelan states. The mayors clearly hope their populations will have an increasing sense of security that will translate into future success for them at the polls. Sucre, home of Venezuela's largest slum, Petare, recently saw its first week without a single homicide. All of the opposition borough mayors have also tried to purge local police forces of corrupt officers and to improve the efficiency of local police checkpoints, efforts that have lowered the numbers of murders and express kidnappings since early 2009. Statistics appear to show these opposition mayors having more success in reducing crime than the Chavista mayor of Libertador, Jorge Rodriguez, although Libertador is the second poorest Caracas borough behind Sucre.

19. (C) Mayor of Greater Caracas Antonio Ledezma, who has seen almost all of his budget and authority usurped by Chavez's appointment of a regional vice president, has seized on the crime issue as a way to try to stay relevant. He convened a metropolitan governing council to draft a plan earlier in the year that would focus on steps to disarm the criminal population, increase public confidence in the police force, combat drug trafficking, and improve coordination among the capital's diverse security services. Amid much fanfare in early August, Ledezma presented the security plan to the Ministry of Interior and Justice for review and was

CARACAS 00001115 003.2 OF 004

summarily ignored and dismissed by Interior Minister Tarek El-Aissami, who said that the central government was doing what was necessary to fight crime in Caracas. Although some of the other Caracas mayors told us Ledezma's plan is more of a political act because of his reduced authority, Ledezma remains undaunted, pledging to continue his fight to pressure the Chavez government to take the crime situation more

seriously.

GOVERNMENT RESPONDS BY BLAMING ACCUSER

¶10. (C) As has become standard operating procedure for dealing with external criticism, such as on issues dealing with narcotics trafficking, human rights, and support to the FARC terrorist group, the Venezuelan Government's strategy has been to attack the accuser and deflect responsibility. Minister of Interior El-Aissami has led the charge, generally dismissing countrywide anxiety over rampant crime as being media speculation. He regularly blames the opposition for exaggerating the extent of crime and insecurity in the country and therefore exacerbating public fears. El-Aissami said that the media's real objective in their "sensational" coverage is to find "a reason to attack the policies of President Chavez." For his part, Chavez on several occasions in July and August echoed his Minister and said the media's "obsession" with tallying daily criminal acts was intended to discredit the efforts of the government to combat public insecurity. While paying lip service to the fact that there is a crime problem in Venezuela, government officials are quick to blame neighbor Colombia for much of the increase in criminal acts. El-Aissami in August said that crimes such as kidnapping, hired assassins, narcotrafficking and paramilitarism have migrated to Venezuela from Colombia, and Venezuela therefore should not be blamed for these problems.

¶11. (C) The Chavez government can no longer disregard polls that consistently identify the issue of insecurity as a priority concern of Venezuelans. Most public opinion polls suggest that personal security is now the number one concern of all social sectors and income levels. The government now appears cognizant that it could be vulnerable on the crime issue and is struggling to enact policies to gain control of the situation. Government officials in recent weeks have been hyping their anti-crime efforts, specifically the establishment of a national police force that will be activated in selected states by December and nationally by April 2010. To meet this goal, the government is looking to form the national police from the ranks of the best officers from state and local police forces, but our contacts say this effort is floundering. In the meantime, El-Aissami has begun to reach out to local and state police, including in opposition areas of the country, to improve cooperation among police forces. In recent weeks the opposition governors of Tachira and Zulia have appeared at anti-crime events with the central government and pledged to do their part to support this unity effort.

¶12. (C) Our contacts say that the government's focus on adding more police officers may help, but they claim the government is not taking steps to strengthen law enforcement and judicial institutions and begin to repair the social fabric of the country. These sociologists say that this problem must be treated as a societal ill and not merely as a problem of better policing. Dr. Briceno-Leon told poloffs that the government for the first time ever is reaching out to local criminologists for advice on devising anti-crime strategies and said he was invited by Minister El-Aissami to a strategy session in late July. Briceno-Leon said that from this meeting it was clear the government "had no idea" how to combat the staggering crime problem and was merely trying to cover itself politically and show that it was doing something.

CHAVEZ STILL TEFLON, FOR NOW-----

¶13. (C) Notwithstanding the surge in violence, Chavez retains considerable support. Caracas' opposition mayors, however, argue that on the crime issue Chavez's "teflon" is beginning to wear off, and Chavez likely understands this. Indeed, Chavez in July publicly and uncharacteristically reprimanded his Ministers over the GBRV's lack of success in fighting crime and told them that more must be done. Baruta

CARACAS 00001115 004.2 OF 004

Mayor Gerardo Blyde in July showed poloffs the latest polling from Datos that suggested more and more Venezuelans are beginning to lay the blame for crime directly at the feet of the central government. In August, segments of the Bolivarian Circles--which consistently support Chavez--began to criticize Interior Minister El-Aissami for his cavalier attitude towards the country's crime problem. If this trend continues, crime could become an issue that causes Chavez's support base to erode.
DUDDY